

THE IPPC HARMONIZATION UPDATE: 2005

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The International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) was deposited with FAO in 1951 when it was created. In 1992, FAO established a Secretariat for the IPPC and put in place interim standard-setting procedures in response to the expectations of governments resulting from the World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (the SPS Agreement). The SPS Agreement identifies the IPPC as the body responsible for setting international standards for phytosanitary measures affecting trade. Codex Alimentarius (Codex) and the Office des Epizooties (OIE) are identified in the SPS Agreement as the bodies responsible for setting standards in food safety and animal health respectively.

In its first five years of standard-setting (1992 to 1997), the IPPC produced seven standards using interim standard-setting procedures established by FAO. In 1997, FAO adopted amendments to the Convention that made provision for the establishment of a formal standard-setting mechanism under the IPPC. Since 1998 when the transition to this new system began, an additional 14 standards have been adopted. In sum, 21 standards were adopted by 2004.

This level of standard-setting is not very significant when compared to its standard-setting sisters, Codex and OIE, who do dozens of new standards each year. However, it is extremely significant that the IPPC has achieved this level of activity with the resources made available to it by FAO. It is also noteworthy because most of the resources used for standard-setting in the IPPC are to ensure the participation of developing countries in standard-setting processes.

The resources currently available to the IPPC support the establishment of two standards per year. Through its strategic planning process, the IPPC has set a very modest target of four standards per year over the near-term, with aims to expand and increase the standard-setting program in future to address in particular the concerns of developing countries over the longer-term. The Secretariat was able to achieve this target during the period 2001 – 2003 as a result of Herculean efforts by a few individuals and the infusion of ad hoc financial and in-kind contributions from various sources. This is not a sustainable situation however, and an increase in core resources is required to maintain the status quo. The 2005 level of standard-setting activity is already signaling a decline back to the two per year level and certain activities have been postponed as a result of capacity limitations within the Secretariat.

The IPPC broadly categorizes its standards into three groups: reference standards; concept standards; and specific standards. At this stage in its standard-setting history, the majority of standards fall within the former two categories. The IPPC has only recently started to create specific standards. These are noteworthy however as one deals with specific measures for a commodity (wood packing) and the other deals with a specific type of measure (irradiation treatment). Both are contemporary and somewhat controversial but were completed by the IPPC in record time.

The process for standard-setting used by the IPPC emphasizes transparency, participation, and technical excellence. Significant effort is devoted to ensuring developing country participation while also striving for the best and most up-to-date scientific and technical inputs.

Standards are drafted by expert working groups based on priorities decided by the Interim Commission on Phytosanitary Measures (ICPM, governing body of the IPPC) and specifications drafted by the IPPC's standing Standard Committee and agreed by the ICPM. Drafts are screened by the Standards Committee at their first meeting each year (usually in May). Drafts approved by the Standards Committee are distributed to member governments for 90 days of consultation (this process occurs through the Summer). The Standards Committee meets again in the Fall to review comments from governments, amend draft standards as appropriate, and approve those that can be submitted to the ICPM for adoption. The ICPM meets annually (normally in April) to adopt standards and take decisions on other aspects of the IPPC work program. The fastest a standard may be completed, from draft to adoption, is two years.

Standards must be adopted by unanimous agreement when first submitted to the ICPM. A vote may be called only if the standard is not accepted the second time it is submitted. Adoption by vote requires a two-thirds majority.

Although struggling with a massive task and a tiny resource base, the IPPC has managed to establish a standard-setting mechanism that has proven to be both credible and effective. In addition, the level of developing country participation in all aspects of standard-setting is relatively high compared to Codex and OIE, and governments have become increasingly more active in IPPC initiatives as the program has progressed.

Unfortunately, however, the phytosanitary community is relatively small and generally not as politically high-profile as colleagues dealing with sanitary issues (animal and human health protection). As a result, the resource base (both nationally and internationally) is much smaller, and political will associated with phytosanitary initiatives is frequently lacking except when emergencies loom large, which is often too late.

Nonetheless, the IPPC continues to maintain an ambitious work program and positive attitude toward the future. An extensive business plan has been developed and was successfully employed to argue for an incremental increase in resources from FAO. Likewise, developed countries are increasingly contributing to trust funds or providing in-kind support for IPPC initiatives, in particular as regards standard-setting and capacity building for the implementation of standards. This latter aspect of the IPPC program has become a central issue with the current focus on WTO-Doha objectives. In future, standard-setting will only be expected to be effective if done hand-in-hand with capacity building to ensure a common understanding of operational aspects and provide the technical basis for implementation.